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COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

Sixth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 7th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Thursday, 28 January 1991, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. RATTRAY

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GE.91-18690/4316B

The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS (agenda item 7) (continued)

(a) REPORTS SUBMITTED BY STATES PARTIES IN ACCORDANCE WITH ARTICLES 16 AND 17 OF THE COVENANT

Syrian Arab Republic (E/1990/6/Add.1)

1. At the invitation of the Chairman, Mr. Khoury (Syrian Arab Republic) took a place at the Committee table.

2. Mr. KHOURY (Syrian Arab Republic) said that his country had ratified the Covenant as far back as April 1969, since the principles set forth in the preamble were consistent with the fundamental principles and laws already prevailing in the country at that time. Since then, further progress had been made in the application of those principles with Mr. Hafez el-Assad's reform movement and the adoption of the 1973 Constitution. The Constitution guaranteed the fundamental rights of citizens and protected them against exploitation. In order to ensure that the Constitution was duly put into effect, the State had undertaken to promote education, protect individual freedoms, strive for equality among citizens and equality of opportunity, protect the family, women and children, guarantee decent living conditions for all and meet their social, economic and cultural needs. Thoughout the ensuring period of advance, Syria had endeavoured to comply with international standards.

3. Work had begun on drafting the report now before the Committee (E/1990/6/Add.1) at the end of 1988, and perusal of the text showed that Syria had already been complying then with the basic principles of the Covenant and with the Committee's guidelines. Future periodic reports would show both that Syria remained faithful to that policy and that it was complying with the revised general guidelines regarding the form and contents of reports (E/C.12/1991/1). He shared the Committee's view that a constructive dialogue was necessary, but pointed out that the Arabic version of the list of issues to be taken up prepared by the pre-sessional working group (E/C.12/WG/1991/CRP.4) had not been transmitted to his Government until 31 October 1991. He hoped that the secretariat would distribute documents in Arabic in good time in the future.

4. In reply to the Working Group's first question, he said that it was the 1973 Constitution itself that established Syria's political structure and the general legal framework required for the protection of human rights.

5. With regard to the characteristics of the Syrian economy, he said that the salient feature was diversification, with the service sector, for instance, representing 50 per cent of GNP. Agriculture also played an important part: dams had been built, the agrarian reform had been put into effect, agricultural productivity was increasing, extension campaigns had been organized and modern technology was being used, for instance in the vital sphere of irrigation. Mining and oil production accounted for 10 per cent of

the country's output. Production was primarily in the hands of the public sector, but cooperatives and the private sector also had a share. The Government was at pains to develop all three sectors and to promote cooperation among them.

6. The right to social security was protected by the State, as were the right to education, which was free at all stages, and the right to health, which the State endeavoured to ensure by providing basic care in public hospitals and clinics and opening maternal and child health care centres in both urban and rural areas.

7. Referring, in response to the Working Group's second question, to the measures taken to inform the public about the Covenant and the reports submitted to the Committee, he said that a day was dedicated to the Covenant every year. On that occasion, information was provided in the form of published articles stressing the universal character of the Covenant and the need to apply it, especially in countries suffering from foreign occupation and racial discrimination. The media covered the Committee's activities and gave publicity to the content of the Covenant.

8. With regard to trade union life, there was an inter-ministerial commission which established dialogue with trade unions, workers' unions and the Women's Union.

9. He deplored the fact that, in its fourth question on the obstacles to the exercise of the rights set forth in the Covenant, the pre-sessional working group had not deemed fit to mention Israeli aggression and the occupation by Israel of Arab territories in the Syrian Golan, or Israel's refusal to recognize the rights of the Palestinian people, including its right to self-determination. That aggression had led Syria to devote a substantial portion of its budget to defence, to the detriment of development. By contrast, the problem of the Kurds referred to by the working group in its fourth question had no grounds in fact. Such was not the case of external debt, which had also been mentioned; it placed a heavy burden on the balance of payments and the treasury. The State was, however, trying to alleviate the impact on citizens and guarantee them enjoyment of their right to an adequate standard of living, in particular by providing them with basic goods and services at affordable prices. It must not be forgotten that hundreds of millions of Syrians had been directly affected by the Israeli occupation of the Syrian Golan and had been driven from their homes and left without land, property or work.

10. In reply to the pre-sessional working group's fifth question, he said that no one in Syria lived below what might be termed a poverty line.

11. The Syrian commission which drew up the reports for the Committee and the bodies responsible for applying the Covenant took the Committee's comments into account, as the Committee would see when the third periodic report was submitted. For instance, Syria was carrying out a programme on science and culture which was having a very positive impact on the population. The programme provided for cultural exchanges between academics and researchers

from Arab and foreign countries. It was enabling Syrians to learn more about their own cultural heritage, whether Arab or foreign, through the audio-visual media and the press. The programme also provided for the granting of fellowships so that Syrian students could acquire further education in universities and training centres abroad. In addition, seminars had been organized in Syria on scientific or cultural topics, and teaching resources and methods, especially for science teaching, were being constantly improved.

12. The rights of women had been reaffirmed both in the principles of the Baath party and in article 45 of the Constitution. Syrian women were entirely free to participate actively and fully in the social, economic and cultural life of the country, and the Government made every effort to remove any obstacles that might prevent them from contributing to the edification of Arab and socialist society. Women had the unreserved right to vote and to stand for election. For 16 years they had been participating effectively in political life and held posts in ministries and in the judiciary. There were 21 women in the People's Council, or Parliament. There were also women ambassadors, chargés d'affaires and consuls and, in 1989, there had been 140 women holding provincial government posts. He added that the Women's Union had been instrumental in increasing the number of day care centres and women's training centres. The illiteracy rate among women was on the decline. As a tribute to women, Mother's Day, celebrated on 21 March, had been decreed an official public holiday throughout the country. Syria was not, however, a party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

13. Syrian citizens had the right and duty to work. It was the State's responsibility to guarantee that right. All workers were entitled to remuneration according to the nature of their work and their output. The State determined the length of the working day, guaranteed the workers' right to social security and rest, and made provision for the payment of bonuses and compensation.

14. Between 1960 and 1989, the labour force had grown from 986,000 to 2,892,000, and the proportion of women in it from 9.1 per cent to 14.8 per cent - a clear indication of the marked increase in the participation of women in active employment over the previous 30 years. In 1981, unemployment had affected 90,577 members of the working population, including 8,778 women; the jobless had been mainly factory workers, machine operators, materials handlers and transport sector personnel, followed by farmers, shop keepers and service sector personnel. Statistics on the educational level of the unemployed showed that illiterate persons accounted for the largest share (32 per cent), followed by persons with primary schooling (27 per cent). The 1984 figures on the breakdown of the unemployed by age and sex showed that 24.5 per cent had been women, with the 15-19 age group accounting for the largest share (28.7 per cent), followed by the 20-24 age group (27 per cent). In 75 per cent of cases, the duration of unemployment had been between 10 and 12 months, with people seeking their first job out of work for longest. The comparison between the figures before and after 1986 was distorted by the fact that, with the entry into force that year of the Labour Code, the sphere of competence of private employment agencies had been reduced and the number of

job-seekers enrolled in those agencies had therefore declined. Unemployed persons were encouraged to acquire skills to facilitate their re-employment, the fact being that more than half of all job-seekers, who were concentrated mainly in the Damascus region, Quneitra and Aleppo, were unskilled.

15. Employment had thus been the major concern of successive Syrian governments and they had adopted various plans in that regard, with a view in particular to ensuring the fair distribution of job opportunities between the country's regions. Since 1990, the Government had also been endeavouring to improve job opportunities in terms of quantity and quality so that it would meet the needs of economic development and diversified production.

16. Workers were protected against arbitrary dismissal by various laws and regulations guaranteeing their material and moral rights. Farmers received a wage guaranteeing a standard of living equivalent to that of workers in other sectors. Trade union committees defended the rights of workers against violations from any quarter. Moreover, seminars were held regularly in each ministry to enable workers to obtain information on their rights. Regarding agricultural work, the regulations were different in the private and public sectors. In the former, there was a code of agricultural relations providing for person-to-person agreement between workers and their employers; in the public sector, working hours, from 8.00 a.m. to 2.30 p.m., were laid down by law for agricultural and other workers alike. Afternoon work and overtime were required of some agricultural workers where the public interest so demanded. Rest periods were not provided for in official regulations, since the working day was very short. The rights of agricultural workers dismissed from their jobs depended on the reason for dismissal; various cases were provided for in the Labour Code. Agricultural workers were entirely free to join a trade union. A general federation of agricultural workers had been established under Decree No. 127/1964; its purposes had been to organize agricultural workers and improve their living standards while democratizing the agricultural production sector through agrarian reform. Two other organizations had subsequently been established - a political union and a workers' cooperative; they had merged in 1974 (Decree No. 21). In addition to ensuring strength through unity, protecting workers' rights and improving the situation of agricultural workers, the merger had been intended to foster cooperation in the agricultural sector, broaden workers' access to modern agricultural technology and protect both employment and production. The number of associations of agricultural workers had increased from 1,565 in 1970 to 1,900 in 1990 and the number of members of such associations had risen from 138,803 to 634,540 during the same period. Act No. 14/1975 recognized that agricultural organizations had a vital role to play in elaborating the national plan for agriculture and in monitoring its implementation. Concerning the protection of agricultural workers' rights, he also mentioned Decree No. 2405, which laid down the amount of compensation to be paid to farmers in the event of expropriation of agricultural land or orchards for public purposes under Legislative Decree No. 20/1983.

17. Generally speaking, wages were increased regularly to ensure that everyone enjoyed a decent standard of living; a decree passed at the beginning of November 1991, for instance, provided for an increase of 25 per cent in all

civil service salaries. With regard to the ILO Conventions ratified by Syria, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, bearing in mind specific comments by the ILO experts, was endeavouring to fill the gaps in national legislation so as to ensure that the provisions of the Conventions were more fully implemented. The latest ILO report, which dated from August 1991, showed that there were few problems in that regard.

18. After quoting article 46 of the Constitution, which guaranteed social protection for all citizens (E/1990/6/Add.1, para. 44), he retraced the development of social security in Syria. The most important of the relevant legislative instruments was Act No. 92/1959, with its successive amendments (Decree No. 143 of 14 August 1961 and Legislative Decree No. 35/1976, in particular); it provided for social protection of workers in the event of industrial accidents or death and for old-age benefits. Another act provided for coverage for civil servants on comparable terms. A single social security act was under consideration.

19. Referring to other issues on the list drawn up by the pre-sessional working group, he said, with regard to child labour, that the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour was entitled, under article 124 of Act No. 91/1959, to prohibit the employment of young persons under the age of 15 in some sectors of industry specified in its directives; the Ministry had also set the minimum age for employment in certain other branches of activity at 17. Article 125 of the same Act prohibited night work (between 7 p.m. and 6 a.m.) by young persons under 15 years of age; in addition, such persons must not do more than six hours of actual work a day or spend more than seven consecutive hours at the workplace. Article 223 of the Labour Code sanctioned infringements of legislative provisions and regulations concerning child labour.

20. With regard to measures concerning juvenile delinquents, the State was endeavouring to ensure their re-integration into society by providing them with technical training or even primary education as appropriate, and by organizing sports and cultural activities for them. There were currently six institutes for the rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents, and young detainees awaiting trial were placed in special centres where each one's social and family situation was closely examined.

21. In response to the questions on housing contained in the list of issues he said that in the major urban centres the population totalled 3,943,543 persons, or 659,728 households, and the number of dwellings was 662,140, which meant that the number of dwellings slightly exceeded the number of households. In the other towns and suburbs, there were 150,008 dwellings for 163,405 households and 1,013,954 inhabitants, which showed that there was no real shortage. The same could be said of the villages, where there were 1,063,140 dwellings for 1,025,257 households and 6,761,504 inhabitants.

22. State policy was aimed at sustainable development in a healthy environment, and development plans consequently took account of environmental protection. Industrial enterprises and bodies were required to carry out environmental impact studies and take the necessary steps to control pollution.

23. With regard to the effective exercise of the right to health, Syria was endeavouring, to the extent that its resources permitted, to provide the entire population, especially persons with a low income, with preventive and therapeutic health care. Treatment provided in public hospitals was free of charge and the State subsidized essential drugs manufactured in the private sector. National health programmes were designed, in particular, to bridge the gap between rural and urban areas and to ensure that village-dwellers and city-dwellers had equal access to health services. Consequently, the State was striving to increase the number of medical centres and hospitals in rural areas and provide them with the necessary equipment and staff. Such establishments gave priority in recruitment to local personnel. Persons studying medicine, pharmacy and dentistry were granted facilities for admission to universities provided they agreed to work in rural areas for at least two years after graduating. That policy had yielded excellent results, since the number of medical establishments in rural areas had nearly doubled in 10 years, increasing from 228 in 1980 to 391 in 1990, and there were now 79 medical centres in those areas, as against 151 in the cities. The authorities had also set up mobile medical teams which went from village to village to provide treatment, distribute medicines, vaccinate children and help to conduct surveys on diseases and their treatment. In addition, the State had endeavoured to broaden the rural population's access to drinking water (in 1990, 73 per cent of village-dwellers had had access to a drinking water supply, compared with 45 per cent in 1980) and to other types of services - electricity, roads, housing and education. Lastly, it was endeavouring to alert the population to health problems by disseminating information. On the subject of AIDS, there had been only 28 recorded cases of seropositivity to date; nine concerned foreigners contaminated by blood transfusions or sexual transmission. Nine others had died from AIDS-related opportunistic diseases.

24. The State set aside 12.7 per cent of its budget for education and received no external support for education other than a small UNESCO subvention to assist developing countries in providing education for all. Not only was education free of charge at all stages, but school textbooks were distributed free to primary school pupils. In 1989, the enrolment rate in compulsory education had been 97 per cent, the remaining 3 per cent being disabled children attending special schools which were controlled by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. He informed the Committee of the following statistics for 1989: in primary education, there had been 2,282,786 pupils divided among 9,100 schools and 81,000 classes or units, with 81,966 teachers. In the two stages of secondary education there had been 36,246 teachers for 842,564 pupils divided among 2,610 schools and 22,950 classes; 57,690 pupils had received technical or vocational education in 170 institutes comprising 1,163 classes, with 9,621 teachers. At the 23 teacher-training colleges (328 classes) there had been 1,209 instructors and 12,987 students. There remained Syria's four universities - those of Damascus, Homs, Latakia and Aleppo - with 44 faculties and 154,763 students enrolled. Lastly, 16,886 pupils had been enrolled at the 51 intermediate-stage training institutes.

25. On the subject of indigenous minorities, he was surprised that the Committee should have referred apropos of Syria, where all population groups had been settled for thousands of years, to a problem specific to the New World.

26. Before concluding, he noted with regret that Arabic was not one of the Committee's working languages; he expressed the hope that the Committee would reconsider the provisions of rule 24 of its Rules of Procedure and re-introduce all the official languages on an equal footing.

27. The Syrian authorities had done their utmost to prepare replies to the written questions in the very short space of time allotted to them. He was grateful for the interest taken by the Committee in his statement and was willing to answer any other questions by members.

28. The CHAIRMAN thanked the representative of Syria for his statement and for the information he had provided in reply to the Committee's written questions. He asked members of the Committee if they had any further questions.

29. Mr. ALVAREZ VITA inquired what other Syrian political parties there were besides the Arab Baath Socialist Party (E/1990/6/Add.1, para. 4) and what part they played in Syrian political life. Referring to the principle of equality between the sexes, he asked whether women's right to one full hour's break per day to take care of infants under the age of one year was also granted to men when it was they who performed that function. He also wondered for how many and which major annual religious festivals a worker was entitled to leave (ibid. para. 26) and whether a worker who was not of the Muslim faith enjoyed the same rights in that regard. He was surprised that the judge could deny permission to marry if there was too great a disparity between the ages of the would-be spouses (ibid., para. 56). Several legal provisions quoted in the report seemed to him to be contrary to the principle of equality between the sexes, for instance the one which required that "the man should be a suitable match for the woman" (ibid., para. 56) and the one authorizing a man to have several wives, for which there seemed to be no reciprocal rules. The report (ibid., para. 57) gave the impression that only the wife could request a divorce, but it subsequently emerged (ibid., para. 58 (b)) that the husband could also do so; he would be grateful for clarifications in that regard. The report also spoke of "compensation to the husband" in the event of divorce (ibid., para 58 (c)). Was there any provision for compensation to be paid to the wife? Could divorce be granted, as the report suggested was possible (ibid., para. 59), when a man decided to divorce without a valid reason?

30. It was also stated in the report (ibid., para. 135) that the Ministry of Culture rejected books which attacked the divinely revealed religions. He wished to know which bodies decided whether a religion had been divinely revealed and on what criteria the decision was taken.

31. Mr. BADAWI requested information on the composition of the Syrian population and the literacy rate in each population group.

32. He also asked what was meant by "the participation of workers in socialist competitions" (ibid., para. 8 (d)), and whether the provision set out in paragraph 9 (b) (iv) should be taken to mean that collective bargaining was prohibited. It was stated in several places in the report that work was a duty - what exactly should be understood by that? Lastly, he asked what were the average sizes of a dwelling and of a family.

33. Mr. KONATE pointed out that there was a discrepancy between the figure of 158,180 km^2 given for the area of the Syrian Arab Republic during the consideration of that country's initial periodic report (E/1983/WG1/SR.2, para. 3) and the figure of 185,180 km^2 given in the second periodic report (E/1990/6/Add.1, para. 1). Why was that so? Since the Baath party was the leading party in the State, he wished to know what its philosophy was. Like Mr. Badawi, he would like to know the demographic composition of Syria, for such information was relevant to the right to participate in cultural life and the principle of non-discrimination and protection of minorities. Did State supervision of education (ibid., paras. 106 and 109) concern curriculum content only or did it extend to censorship of teachers? To what extent was it compatible with "the principle of educational democracy" (ibid., para. 122)? Lastly, if the State endeavoured to "promote and propagate the message of Arab civilization" (ibid., para. 120), did it make a comparable effort to foster the cultural identity of the non-Arab sectors of the population? (In this connection, see also question No. 54 on the Working Group's list of issues, E/C.12/WG/1991/CRP.4).

34. Mr. SIMMA wondered whether some parts of the report, such as paragraph 5, truly reflected the situation in Syria.

35. With regard to trade unions (E/1990/6/Add.1, para. 9 (a)), he wished to know whether they were dependent on the Baath party or not. He was surprised that the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour had the right to supervise trade union property (ibid., para. 31 (d)), a point he was all the more desirous of making as, in its fourteenth report on the implementation of the Covenant (E/1992/4, page 9), the International Labour Organisation had stated that the Syrian Arab Republic had not submitted any information on the application of ILO Convention No. 87 on freedom of association and protection of the right to organize. He would like clarification concerning the apparent contradiction between one of the objectives of the farmers' organizations, namely "to combat bureaucracy" (E/1990/6/Add.1, para. 30 (c)), and the information in paragraphs 61 to 68 of the report, from which it emerged that the influence of the public sector on agriculture had greatly increased. With regard to the right to strike, it was, in his view, cynical to say (ibid., para. 39) that workers no longer had any need to resort to strikes. He would like to know whether there had in fact been any attempts to stage strikes and what had happened to the organizers.

36. The reports stated (ibid., para. 57) that child custody was entrusted to the mother until a specified statutory age. Did non-Syrian wives of Syrian nationals have the right to leave Syria with children in their custody? If not, on what grounds was that right denied them? According to information in his possession, all legal acts concerning children required the father's consent, and he would like clarifications on that subject. Since the report

stated (ibid., para. 113) that the State made special provision for talented students, he wished to know to what extent careers in Syria were connected with membership of the Baath party. Having read in the report (ibid., para. 114) that the State safeguarded the rights of teachers, he asked what was their average wage, whether it was lower or higher than that of military personnel - a captain in the Syrian army, for example - and what percentage of teachers had to engage in other occupations in addition to teaching in order to support themselves.

37. Finally, since the report stated (ibid., para. 17) that Syria devoted a large share of its resources to the defence of the country against the Israeli enemy, he wished to know what proportion of the Syrian budget was devoted to defence and what share of that amount went into meeting the cost of keeping 40,000 Syrian soldiers in Lebanon.

38. Mr. MUTERAHEJURU, referring to the figures on the agricultural sector given in the report (ibid., paras. 2, 26 and 67), asked what exactly was meant by the term "agricultural worker" in Syria, whether there were agricultural holdings other than cooperatives and, if so, how many of them there were, whether there were any family holdings, whether they were subject to regulation and, if so, what differences and similarities there were between relations within such family holdings and the usual kind of employer-employee relations.

39. Referring to the laws governing family matters quoted in the report (ibid., paras. 55 and 56), he noted that the family was seen in terms of marriage. Did a "family" consist of a husband, two wives and their children, or was there another acceptation of the term? Were other kinds of union accepted, tolerated or prohibited? What objective criteria did a second marriage have to meet in order to be legitimately justified (ibid., para. 56)? What exactly was the dowry? Was inheritance between spouses a genuine inheritance or did it amount to a right of usufruct? If a married man had a child by his wife's sister or aunt - out of wedlock, since marriage in such cases was said to be prohibited - what happened to the child?

40. Finally, he wished to know the status of private schools (ibid., para. 108), what the State was doing to encourage private education, and what was the position of such education in terms of quantity or quality (curricula, teachers, diplomas).

41. Mrs. BONOAN-DANDAM also drew attention to some of the information on the family provided in the report (ibid., para. 56). She wished to know what the legal age was for contracting marriage, what recourse was available to a woman whose husband installed a second wife under the same roof without her consent, and what happened if a woman requested a divorce because she felt that conjugal life had become impossible (ibid., para. 57) but the judge considered that it was still "possible". She would also like to know whether male and female children were entitled to equal shares of their parents' estates. It was surprising to read in the report (ibid., para. 59) that a man could decide to divorce without a valid reason, a right which was denied women. Observing that the compensation due to the wife in such a case had been fixed at the equivalent of three years' maintenance, she asked how that figure had been

arrived at. Referring to the information on dependency allowances given in paragraph 60 of the report, she asked whether such allowances were also paid in respect of daughters, and not sons, pursuing their secondary or higher education.

42. She would also like to know what present-day young Syrian women felt about the marriage laws and whether they were more aware of their rights and more "liberated" than their counterparts of 20, 30 or 50 years ago.

43. She noted a discrepancy in the report in connection with the investment of private savings in housing. According to paragraph 70, more controls were required to regulate the investment of private savings in low-cost housing; paragraph 75, on the other hand, referred to legislative enactments intended to encourage citizens to acquire vacant lots and prepare them for use as sites for building projects. She would welcome clarifications on that point.

44. Regarding the right to education, she wished to know what "female education" (ibid., para. 111) entailed and what sectors were accessible to girls after primary education. She also expressed concern about articles 5 and 6 of Act No. 35 on compulsory education (ibid., para. 118), which stipulated that parents or guardians of children between the ages of 6 and 12 who did not enrol them in primary school received a formal warning, whereas any person employing a child of school-going age was liable to imprisonment or a fine. She found those provisions very harsh and wondered whether the reason for their adoption was the prevalence of breaches of the law on compulsory education. She was also shocked by article 8 of the same Act (ibid., para. 118), under which incentive payments were granted to teachers who helped to identify children not enrolled at school. That was a questionable practice akin to spying.

45. Mr. MRACHKOV noted that there were several references in the report to the "Constitution of the Party". He wondered whether that document had any legal value, especially since, according to the report, the Baath party was the leading party in society.

46. Syria having ratified ILO Convention No. 81 on labour inspection, he would welcome further information on labour inspection in the country: on its role, the way it was organized, the number of inspectors, etc. He also wished to know how the State guaranteed the right to remuneration "according to the nature and output of ... work" mentioned in paragraph 19 of the report.

47. Turning to trade union rights, he took it that there was only one trade union in Syria and would like to know whether such uniformity in trade union matters had been imposed on workers or freely chosen by them. He had also been surprised to hear that two trade unions had merged by virtue of a decree and wondered whether in that case one could speak of freedom of association.

48. Lastly, he wished to know whether there were any private hospitals in Syria and, if so, what were the respective roles of the public sector and the private sector in health care.

49. Mr. SPARSIS observed that, to judge from the report (ibid., para. 40), the right to strike did not exist in Syria. If strikes were indeed prohibited, ILO Conventions No. 87 on freedom of association and protection of the right to organize and No. 98 on the right to organize and collective bargaining, both of which Syria had ratified, were meaningless. He wondered whether, in the event of a dispute, workers had the right to strike if the conciliation procedure failed or if the body to which the matter had been referred - conciliation committee, board of arbitration or administrative authority - was unable to reconcile the views of the union and the employer. He also wished to know what role the State played in collective bargaining and whether the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations had made any comments on the application of Conventions Nos. 87 and 98 by the Syrian authorities.

50. Since Syria had not ratified ILO Convention No. 151 on labour relations in the public service, he would like to know whether civil servants' remuneration and terms of employment were determined unilaterally by the State or by collective bargaining, and what civil servants could do to protect their rights and interests.

51. Lastly, he would like to know whether labour, health, family and education policy was determined by the Government alone or in consultation with the groups concerned, such as trade unions, employers, physicians, parents and students.

52. Mr. WIMER ZAMBRANO requested information on the composition of Syria's population and, accordingly, on ethnic minorities.

53. Mr. FOFANA, referring to the Committee's interest in the situation of vulnerable groups, asked what steps had been taken to assist unemployed and poor people living in urban areas, especially with regard to food and housing.

54. While the report contained interesting information on the agrarian system in Syria, he would welcome details on the methods of producing, storing and distributing foodstuffs and wished to know whether those methods fostered the exercise of the right to adequate food. He also wondered whether there were any landless farmers in Syria and, if so, whether agrarian reforms should not be introduced.

55. Mrs. JIMENEZ BUTRAGUEÑO, referring to the pre-sessional working group's list of issues, observed that the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic had not replied to what she regarded as the important question whether the rights set forth in the Covenant were guaranteed to non-nationals, or to the question whether equality of rights between men and women had been achieved. In that connection, she would like to hear more about the rights of women, including, in particular, whether a woman could invoke her husband's remarriage as a reason for requesting divorce, whether divorced women could, like divorced men, remarry and whether there were any women's associations working to improve the status of women in general.

56. Mrs. IDER noted from the report that Syria had acceded to a number of international human rights instruments and wondered what happened when their provisions were contrary to domestic legislation. She would also like to know whether citizens could invoke before the courts the provisions of treaties and conventions ratified by Syria.

57. Mr. KHOURY (Syrian Arab Republic) thanked the Committee memb rs for their further questions, which showed their interest in Syria's economic, social and cultural situation.

58. He assured the Committee that the international instruments ratified by Syria became an integral part of domestic legislation and that any citizen could invoke them before the courts.

59. With regard to the situation of political parties, a progressive national front had been established to ensure broader participation in political life. It was composed of several political parties, including the Communist Party and the Arab Socialist Party and its aim was to promote the welfare of the people.

60. The decision to merge two trade unions had been taken in the interest of those concerned, namely agricultural workers. There had never been any question of imposing anything upon them, and the merger had been intended to improve their situation.

61. He would look into the other questions that had been asked and reply to them at a later stage.

The meeting rose at 12.40 p.m.